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The CIA and the Press

At the American Society of Newspaper Editors convention last week, CIA Director Stansfield Turner, responding to a question from the floor, said he had modified previous CIA policy against using journalists, academics and clerics for intelligence assignments to permit exceptions personally authorized by himself. This produced a rush to the audience microphones by outraged editors, and today on our "Other Opinions" page we present Carl Rowan, liberal, against Adm. Turner and Pat Buchanan, conservative, for him. We must cast our lot with the latter.

Journalists stand in a special relationship to the public and to officialdom, and are rightly zealous to avoid compromise or the appearance of compromise of our accuracy and objectivity. For a foreign correspondent, the trust of the public that reads him, the sources who inform him and the officials who permit him to work in their countries is the heartbeat without which the profession could not live.

But we were at that session of the ASNE, and that is not what we took Adm. Turner to be talking about. He specified that if a CIA mission affected what a reporter reported, that was the reporter's responsibility. Clearly, slanting the news or knowingly reporting misinformation was not the kind of ad hoc mission he had in mind — unlike one of his predecessors, William Colby, whose 1977 boast of using journalists to write CIA-prepared copy first raised the issue — and not the kind of mission reputable journalists would accept.

We would guess he had in mind such things as passing on information, instructions or funds, arranging contacts, collecting messages in the course of the journalist's ordinary work in cases when no other means are available or possible. The nature of foreign correspondents' routines — popular fiction notwithstanding — does not lend itself to cloaks and daggers.

Adm. Turner taxed the protesting editors with naivete, for it is not hard to assume that many foreigners take into consideration the possibility that correspondents may routinely report to the CIA, as we, with far more reason, assume TASS correspondents are KGB operatives or sources. A good reporter, given information by a source off the record or discovering some hidden fact or development, is more likely to use it to develop a story he will write for publication than to deep-six it in the analysis section of the CIA.

But there is information and information, and a reporter who discovers something of urgent or crucial impact on national security, but something that is better known by responsible authorities than either published to the world or left unknown, will hardly keep it as a priest does a confession. We are dealing here with individuals with judgment, not a group of clones, and Adm. Turner's appeal to a patriotism that does not compromise professional principle is valid.

All American citizens, whatever their work, have an obligation to their nation's interest, and should be free to determine what part they can or will play in protecting that interest. The correspondent who completes the recruitment of a high Soviet Defense Ministry officer as an agent has helped the nation without harming his profession. In the three exceptions Adm. Turner says he has authorized (but which were never put into operation because the situations changed and the work was no longer needed), all three journalists were willing to cooperate, and we have enough respect for our colleagues to assume that they were willing for all the right reasons.

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